

Children's play: theory and practice ECEY4003

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Section 1

Play is a physically and mentally unpretentious and enjoyable way for children to be able to stay well, keep active, be happy and without any other purposes in mind. Play enhances the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children. Through play children can learn many things about themselves as well as the world around them. There are also many skills children will learn from play, for example: confidence, social skills, interaction, resilience, curiosity and dealing with challenging situations (nidirect government services, no date).

There are several different types of play but within this section the discussion will focus on two types of play which are: physical play and symbolic play.

Physical play with children involves active exercise whether this be indoors or outdoors, for example: climbing, jumping, dancing, skipping, bike riding and ball play. This type of play suggests that it is related to children's developing whole body and hand/ eye co-ordination as well as building strength and endurance (Whitebread et al., 2012).

Physical play can keep children fit as well as contribute to a wide range of health benefits. It can also help children understand their bodies for what they can do rather than what they cannot do. It can also help children have a better sense of self-confidence and self of achievement, no matter what their ability. It is also said that physical development has been shown to contribute to brain growth and function. Physical play has a few benefits for children which are: strength, balance, coordination, social skills, mood, brain function, fitness, confidence and dexterity skills (make time 2 play, no date).

According to the research (McIlroy, 2021) we can determine that symbolic play is the type of play that young children engage in, when they use a toy or an object to

represent something else. Symbolic play involves pretend play, for example a box becomes a boat. There are many benefits from symbolic play which are: supports language skills, nurtures social and emotional skills and boosts creativity. According to Bretherton (1984) symbolic plays are deeply influenced by Piaget. Piaget noted that children demonstrate a growing ability to separate the symbol from what it symbolizes.

The greatest resource available to a child as a learner is a practitioner who understands their learning and development journey. Practitioners should support each individual child's developing social skills and helping them make relationships with others. It is important to share all the information with other practitioners or teachers about the children's individual needs (Drake, 2014, p. 25).

When planning the environment, we as practitioners need to give our thoughts on which areas should be included. Things like space, facilities and equipment need to be taken into consideration. It's important to plan carefully to ensure the curriculum is covered and that the learning environment is enhanced regularly, for example doing a rotation within the activities in order to further develop and extend children's learning. The environment should be inclusive for all (Drake, 2014, p. 25).

It's important for practitioners to be able to identify and assess each child's strengths and needs so then we can plan appropriately. For example, children with additional needs like visual impairment will need to know the layout of the classroom or area when playing. It's important to provide a variety of resources including toys and equipment suitable for playing, for example different types of balls with different textures or sizes (Drake, 2014, p. 28).

When it comes to the environment within our settings, it can help practitioners to support the child's development and learning by offering help at the right time in just the right way but also allowing them the freedom to experiment, investigate and pursue their own personal interests. As said within Reggio Emilia's holistic approach, it allows the children to have hands on discovery learning that allows the children to use all their senses to learn. (Drake, 2014, p.).

According to research (Rymanowicz, 2015) Maria Montessori said that “Play is a children’s work”. Adults being able to ensure physical and symbolic play can be included in practice is by being present and engaged but not overtaking. Adults still need to be involved in the process when children are playing as this will help them learn and grow. It is also an opportunity to aim to create trusting and supportive relationships.

As mentioned in (The Early Years Foundation Stage Effective Practice: Play and Exploration, 2007) practitioners need to resource and plan a stimulating environment where they are able to extend and support children's play. This can be achieved by careful observing and suitable intervention.

Section 2

According to the research (Schwarzmueller and Rinaldo, 2013) we can determine that self-directed play is a child following their own interests. Self-directed play or “free” play takes place when physical and mental activity is gone after to please the child's personal impulse, such as interest. Self- directed helps build persistence, problem solving skills and resilience. The start of creative activity must emerge from the child, who is then able to maintain in control. It is important that the children are still guided in their play, nevertheless the guidance must only happen from time to time and only happen in the very beginning stages.

Piaget recognised and valued the importance of play as a machine, so that children could assemble understanding. Self-directed play allows children to learn at their own pace. Within self-directed play there is no timeline. It lets children experience independence from a young age (Aubrey and Riley, 2022, p.55-56).

As said by (McInnes et al., 2013) some previous studies have shown that a child's outlook on play has shown that the child can use a variety of reminders to be able to adapt between activities that are seen as play or not play. It is said that these signs can be arranged as either emotional or environmental. Emotional can be the amount of choice the child has within that activity and whether the child has voluntarily chosen it or how easy the activity is for them. Environmental can be where the activity is taking

place and whether an adult is involved. Children convert between play and non-play circumstances according to the cues they are given.

It is proposed that early year's practitioners must engage in teaching and learning that clears the way for play. It has been argued that direct engagement within teaching is lacking within early years of education. This is because when coming across their practice, practitioners tend to pay full attention to the children's behavior, rather than their own. Many practitioners within their role felt that observing a child's play was paramount but that they should wait to be invited by the child into the activity at hand (McInnes et al., 2011).

The Playwork principles put in place the professional and ethical framework. As a practitioner, the role is to support all children in the creation of a space in which they can play, as well as being up to date on knowledge of the play process and reflective practice. It is also important to ensure that the style of play enables the children to be able to extend their play. It is vital to balance risk and well-being of the children (Play Wales, 2020).

Adults can support self-directed play by ensuring that they are engaging with the children during their play. Ensuring to not fully overtake and to take a stand back so they use their imagination. Talking to them about what they are doing during their play, as this will let children know that practitioners are invested in them and respect their play decisions. Planning and organizing the learning areas before activities as well as providing lots of opportunities for them. This will then allow the children to freely play and flourish using the materials they want to use; in the way they want to use them (Sagepub, 2013).

Firstly, Froebel has a vast influence upon the practice of early years practitioners. Practitioners owe much to Froebel upon the importance of play and its role within education. Froebel has left us with not just an important way of thinking but also a legacy of how to work, in practice and with children (Macblain, 2014, p.15-16).

Whilst (Reggio Emilia Approach, 2019) said that learning, and play are united. Children are able to construct their own learning when given the opportunity. It is believed that children are natural communicators and that they should be encouraged through whatever means they want. This can be drawing, painting, movement or words. This is why it's important for children to be given a wide range of materials to choose from.

The Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings states that practitioners have a responsibility to make strong connections with a child's home and surrounding community. It is important to set the expectations for a child's learning and enable a safe environment that allows children to express and regulate their feelings in a positive manner. Practitioners need to model a cheerful approach to all children's learning and make the most out of teachable moments (A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, n.d.)

Section 3

Foundation profile observations provide an assessment implement that lines up an assessment on entry through to the end of the foundation phase between the ages of three and seven. It is a national assessment that all children are to take part in to establish a baseline within their first couple of weeks within school. It evaluates children's potential and development in four areas of their learning. These are: Language, Literacy and Communication skills, Mathematics, Physical Development and Social, Personal Development, Well-being and Diversity (Foundation Phase Profile Frequently asked questions, n.d.).

In addition to this, the Foundation Phase's main purpose is to provide a consistent baseline, which will then align with the end of phase outcomes. The profile allows practitioners to be supported to be able to provide a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for all children. This profile also lines up assessments that get carried out by health professionals. This is to ensure that if a child has any additional learning needs (ALN), this will be noted and then those children will be given the support they need. Engagement with parents/carers for their child's education within Foundation Phase is important as it states within the (Foundation Phase Profile Handbook, n.d.).

The profile allows the parents/carers to have a wide range of information, so they are able to see their child's current stage of learning and development.

According to the research (Foundation Phase Profile Handbook, n.d.) it is determined that the profile consists of elements which are: Handbook- This is for guidance on using the profile, record form- This is an element used when there is no software based systems, compact profile- This is small snapshots of a child's development and full profile- This is where it uses all the skills ladders within the foundation phase. The observations need to be carried out within the first six weeks of the child starting nursery.

The benefit of this observation is that this assessment tool is made up of observations and formative assessments to be able to build up a holistic picture of children's development and abilities. The possible limitations as said within (Foundation Phase Profile Frequently asked questions, n.d.) within this observation is that the observation has not been aligned to other software systems to track the progress of children in Wales.

We can determine that according to (Evans, 2015) The Foundation Phase Profile Observations help practitioners support children who are at the early stages in their development, as well as being able to pinpoint any arising issues that maybe holding a child back in some areas.

In addition to this, it is said that (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Observing Children, n.d.) state that practitioners can find out how an individual children's skills are developing as well as finding out what the children are able to do and not able to do. Information is then gathered to know the children's strengths, interests and personal needs across all areas of learning. Therefore, we can inform the children of their own achievements.

Within the observations for the Foundation Phase Profile, it was said by practitioners that the observations worked well due to the fact that it provides a good overall profile of the child's ability but what does not work so well is that practitioners said that it was too

time consuming, to many tick boxes, setting up certain areas of activities to cover a certain observation, as well as not being tailored enough for the individual learner (GOV.WALES, n.d.).

To conclude Frobel's theory points out that it is paramount that practitioners are able to understand the concept of observation. This includes professional practice as the numerous lenses through which they observe children, and that children see their world. Frobel based most of his understanding on observing them, this has changed the way we think about children's play (Merrick, 2021).

Section 4

As said within (Howard and McInnes, 2013) it is said that when children perceive an activity as play, they will show more signs of emotional well-being, deeper engagement and improved task performance, than when they perceive the same activity as not play. Following this Vygotsky's theory suggests that play offers a valuable meaning of assessment because children are more likely to perform to the best of their ability.

According to Bénabou and Tirole (2003) there is evidence to suggest that extrinsic motivation can sometimes conflict with intrinsic motivation and may have negative reinforcements in the long run. This is because there is experimental and field evidence that indicates that extrinsic treatments showed better compliance at the beginning of a task involving verbal skills but then worse in the long run, than those in the intrinsic group.

Peter Grey believed that education is the child's responsibility. When children know they are responsible for their own education, they will then take responsibility for it. When children believe that someone else is taking responsibility for their education, and they only must do what they are told, they then tend to do that in a minimal way and do not take responsibility for their education. He believed that children should have an unlimited amount of play to be able to try out different things. As well as having adults around them that are helpers not judges (www.youtube.com, n.d.).

Children need adults that pay attention and tune into them and who are able to read their emotions and then respond appropriately. They need to feel secure, be able to communicate to gain a positive relationship based on trust and respect. Also, children need to have a space to play as well as being well equipped and above all a playful adult to engage with them (Howard and McInnes, 2013, p.101-110).

When practitioners observe children during play, they are able to find out how the children connect with others and their environment. It's a way of being able to understand the child and let adults know their skills and communication. When children are observed during play, it does give more of an accurate reflection of where they are within their development because it allows them to be free to do what they like to do best. They can relax more during play rather than in a classroom with answers to answer on a piece of paper or activity. Observation techniques are highly influenced in Reggio Emilia Schools as they use different observational techniques to record and assess. This can be children's work, photographs, comments written by practitioners who have worked with the children during play or even children's discussions and ideas (Hoidn, 2010).

Play is important when observing and assessing children because each child is unique and has their own set of abilities. Observations in different situations like play, can be captured at first hand. Practitioners can then note what the child chose to do, their interests and what they enjoy playing with (Early Years Matters, 2021).

It is determined that according to (McInnes et al., 2011) children who make use of an activity under playful conditions, such as on the floor, adults nearby or their choice show a higher level of performance, than children doing a formal practice, such as at a table and not their choice.